

Episode 316: How to Spot and Outsmart a Narcissist at Work with Rebecca Zung

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Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:00

Sometimes we have to work with people who aren't just difficult. Their behaviors are toxic. So knowing how to spot these behaviors and how to navigate them, can help you protect yourself and your team.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:12

Today's guest is Rebecca Zung. Rebecca is a globally recognized negotiation and communication expert, as well as an attorney recognized by the US News. She's a best selling author and the designer of the proven SLAY Method® for negotiating with narcissist. Rebecca and I talk about how to spot a narcissist, what to do to protect herself, and what you need to do to get what you need from them, plus so much more. Also a warm welcome to Vanessa K, Sabrina B, and Jen S to Podcast Plus. In the extended episode available to members of Podcast Plus, Rebecca unpacks, the SLAY Method® to negotiating with anyone even a high conflict personality. Now, here's the conversation.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:42

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Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:09

Are you a manager, boss, or team leader who aspires to level up and unleash your team's full potential? You're listening to the Modern Manager podcast, and I'm your host, Mamie Kanfer Stewart. Each week, I explore effective strategies and provide actionable insights that supercharge your management abilities, optimize team performance, and foster a healthy

workplace culture. Become a rockstar manager and help your team thrive at themodernmanager.com/more.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:33

Thank you so much for joining me today, Rebecca. I am really looking forward to diving into this topic about working with, negotiating with, talking to people who have some difficult personality traits, specifically something called narcissism, which, as you've noted in your work, is something that is, I think, on the rise. And I think from also for myself, I have definitely noticed some of these challenging personality traits in my people that I've engaged with, let's just put it that way. So thank you so much for coming on today to talk through how we can work with folks like this and improve all of our lives.

Rebecca Zung 02:16

It's my pleasure. Yes, we've all had to deal with them at some point in our lives, unfortunately. Yeah. So it's always a good thing to figure out how to deal with them, because they're not going to change. So we might as well be the one to know how to.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 02:31

Yeah, so maybe you could start by describing what are some of the different types of narcissists and the different characteristics that we should be kind of looking out for. And I'm guessing we might want to deal differently with different kinds of folks. So maybe you could just start by giving us the lay of the land?

Rebecca Zung 02:48

Definitely. So, you know, I didn't even know that there were different types myself until I had to deal with a covert passive aggressive narcissist in a business partner, who happened to be a female. And it wasn't until after I got out of that relationship that a psychologist friend of mine said, you knew she was a covert passive aggressive narcissist. And I was like, what is that? Like what words just came out of your mouth? I didn't even know what that was. So I started studying all about that. And I didn't know that women could be narcissists. I didn't know that there were two different types. You know, I was only aware of what I now know to be a grandiose narcissist. And a grandiose narcissist is your typical type of what most people think of a narcissist. It's the one that kind of fills the room, brags about themselves, kind of is demanding, it impulsive, the one that will tell everybody how great they are, is very right in your

face. Right. And that's the one that most people sort of think of as a narcissist. But a covert narcissist is also a narcissist. Both types of narcissists don't have empathy. And that's sort of across the board of any type of narcissist is they lack empathy. But a covert narcissist is a type of narcissist is more of a victim mentality. This is the type that is also charming, they all kind of come with a type of charm to them, and especially where they start off with love bombing and how, you know, oh my goodness, where have you been all my life and this isn't a professional relationship or a personal relationship. And we are so perfect to be together and we are we're meant to meet and the whole thing where you just feel like this amazing connection at the beginning and it happens really quickly, really quickly. And very quickly. They want to get to that next level. That happens with a covert or a grandiose sometimes called an overt narcissist, but with a covert narcissist. It's much more under the radar much more under the radar. So you'll see more passive aggressive, underhanded types of things. So it might be an inadvertent email that's not like your chain that you're not copied on. And oh, I did that. I didn't mean to do that, you know, where it's, there's always sort of this plausible deniability with a covert narcissist, where I always call it clean hands. Like, where they're able to sort of go, what me? that wasn't me, you know, with a covert narcissist. It's, they'll smear you, but it's in terms of care a lot of times, so it's like, in a personal situation, it might be, I'm so concerned about Johnny and his drinking. Just so worried about him. You know, I just just drinking so much more lately. And, you know, I just am worried that maybe something's going on in his personal life. And it's like, people think that, oh, there's just such a caring person, but they're really smearing. Okay. And so then like, six months later, it's, oh, well, now they're divorcing? And will you testify against Johnny, with the kids, because I've been telling you for months that Johnny is, you know, an alcoholic. And Johnny probably doesn't have a drinking problem whatsoever, you know, but they, they present as victims almost. And so that's, you know, where I think covert narcissists, in a lot of ways are actually more dangerous, more self, more smart, in a lot of ways than a grandiose narcissist, because they are harder to detect, much harder. But you'll see it come out in passive aggressive ways. You know, Oh, that that dress looks really great on you for your figure, you know, that kind of thing? Like they're very jealous, insecure people. But it's, it's like, right under the radar.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 07:46

Yeah, and I can imagine in the workplace, it might show up in ways like, you know, I'm concerned about so and so taking on that project. That's exactly how it turns out, make sure that like, are they really ready for it? And then as soon as one bump goes in the route, Oh, see, you know, maybe that wasn't a good idea. Maybe they really aren't ready? Right, or.

Rebecca Zung 08:07

Exactly how it turns out, or I'm so concerned about so and so being, you know, late, so much more lately. And, you know, I've just noticed that they're coming in, you know, so late, a lot more,

or they're leaving early, a lot more recently, you know, they're taking a lot more time off, I'm just really worried about, you know, maybe there's something going on at home, you know, and like something like that, and they're probably not really doing that, but they're just, they're, they're causing trouble in the office. And they pit people against each other like that, like, oh, I noticed that so and so got, you know, assigned this project and wonder why they got that and you didn't, you know, like they just cause trouble like that. And they just they know that they're pitting people against each other. And they're but oh, I didn't, I wasn't saying anything. Now. What are you talking about me? I was call them like the pearl grabbers. Like, why? Me? Why?

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 09:14

So this sounds really complicated, because they're not being so overt about it. And it does have that kind of plausible deniability. So if we are thinking about in our team members, and we're, you know, maybe have some inklings that maybe someone on our team is behaving in this way, what's the first thing we should be doing to start to kind of interrupt those patterns, and try to neutralize some of the negativity that they could be causing?

Rebecca Zung 09:46

Well, for one thing, definitely, always document everything that you can, because you want to make sure that you know what's going on at all times and document in real time. And a lot of times people are like, well, you know, I don't, it's not that bad. Or, you know, I don't think that I really need to or they overlook things, and they try to just look at the good I mean, people were so trained to actually maybe just look to the good or maybe overlook things that you know, because we want to see what we want to see. And, and so, we might just say, Well, you know me maybe they were having a bad day, or maybe they really were just blah, blah, blah, whatever. And you don't really see, it's almost like that slow frog, the frog is boiling in the water and you don't see until you're you've already been boiled. So I would just say, start taking note of things when they're happening. And because you never know. And those are the things that down the road, when you have a pattern, when you have documentation, it ends up being so powerful as leverage. And I will tell you that narcissists are very afraid, they're, they're much more afraid of you than you are of them. And they, they don't want you to call them out. And so if you do end up having leverage against them, especially against somebody that they respect, or don't want to be exposed to, let's say it's a boss, or let's say, it's somebody else that they respect, and you've got a pattern of their behavior, let's say, you know, I've got that you were, you said this several times, or you did this several times, or whatever, they will definitely back down, they will definitely back down, always follow up anything you've ever done with a confirmatory email, you know, we had this conversation and you said, this, blah, blah, blah, because another hallmark of covert narcissist is that they are inherently lazy. And they will take credit for other people's work. And so they'll agree to do things. And then they will not do their part. And then you end up doing their share of a joint project, for example. And then they'll come

along at the last second, and maybe we just do like the last second of it, or the last portion of it, or whatever. And then they'll take credit for the whole thing. Or they'll take credit for, you know, half of it or whatever or it is they'll say it was their idea or whatever. And you want to make darn sure that it was known what actually took place in a situation like that. So you want to make sure that you're constantly, you know, documenting things in writing. Because they're, you know, if they say that they're going to do something, chances are, they will either not do it at all, or wait until the last second. So I would just make sure you document that in writing.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 13:27

That makes a lot of sense. And it's probably just a good practice in general to be documenting what everyone says they're going to do, and then following up when people aren't doing it and documenting that they're not doing it. So good strategy all around. Yeah.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 13:43

I'm wondering about the idea of, I think you call it like narcissistic blindness, that, like they're, well my personal, is that term correct? And if so, can you describe it.

Rebecca Zung 13:58

So what happens with narcissists is that their brain has experienced trauma as a child. And what causes narcissism to begin with is that they experience have rested development in their limbic system. And that's what causes them to be triggered as adults, and when they are triggered by anything that could be making them feel slighted, making them feel exposed, you know, could be a tone of voice, it could be an eye roll, it could be anything that causes them to feel like they're going to lose control or anything like that. It's usually not rational or reasonable. But when they are triggered, then that limbic system part of their brain, the emotional center part of the brain takes over and then the prefrontal cortex is no longer in control. It's the Olympic system that you're dealing with now. And it's whatever age they were at that time. So they're really are children in adult bodies. And now you're dealing with that. And when that happens, they become unaware of the collateral damage that they're causing to people around them. They're unaware of the the damage in their wake. And what I find to be even more frightening is that they become unaware of the damage that they're causing to themselves even. And they will literally sabotage themselves to exact revenge on others. And at that point, you cannot communicate with or negotiate with a narcissist in the same way that you can with anybody else. And that is what I've heard, that's the, you know, where I have heard the, the term narcissistic blindness applied, because they become blind to the the circumstances that they are causing the impact that they're causing around them at that point. And that's why I have talked about how you have to communicate with them and, and negotiate with them in a

different way. And I say, you know, you have to look at it really almost as a third party, like, you can't take it personally, you can't go, well, that's wrong, or the I'm right, or this is bad, or that's good, or whatever it is, you really just have to go, this is a strategy that now has to be employed, almost as if, if somebody has diabetes, well, then you have to get insulin, or if somebody has autism, well, this is how it has to be, you have to deal with that. I mean, if somebody has narcissism, then this is what you have to do. So you can't sit around and go, Well, this is awful. And this is terrible. Like you really have to go, Okay, I see that this is this person. And it's almost like they have their two year old having a tantrum on the floor. Right? When when a two year old has a tantrum on the floor, you go, Okay, I see that you're upset, I see that you're angry. So when you're done, we can have a conversation. And so that's how I teach people to interact with them, I can see that you are upset, when you have calmed down, we can resume this conversation. Like literally observe their behavior to them. And I say, observe, don't absorb, respond, don't react, and become, you know, have like, I say, put an invisible shield down around you. And I say step one, don't run and be like Wonder Woman with the bullets or those Superman with the shield, you know, bullets off your chest, put a Teflon shield around you, and just start observing behavior to them. This approach is not working for me, you know, we can, you know, come to speak, when you can calm down, every single person deserves to be treated with respect, whether it's your boss, your colleague, your employee, whoever it is, and don't engage with somebody who is not treating you with respect or who is in an emotional rage state. And if somebody's like yelling, I always say take your tone down, the more you can call, like, bring your tone down, speak, like slower and lower, it actually helps to bring the conversation lower.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 19:17

I mean, I think what's really fascinating about this is that I think I kind of had assumed maybe that people who are narcissistic, or like there's, they're so caught up in themselves. And so they don't care about the collateral damage, right, that they they don't, they don't, they don't think about it. They don't care about it, because it's not impacting them. But I think what is interesting about what's happening, it's not only do they care, but they don't even see it. Right? They don't even understand what's happening, which is different than I see it and I just don't care about it. But to not even see it at all or to, to both see it and not care or not care in either case. Right. Like that's a that's what makes it just so much more challenging to work with them. And because I would say like so much of the the coaching that I do, a lot of folks that I've worked with, were were acting but as soon as someone says, Hey, what you're doing is really hard for me. Like, oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. I didn't know I was doing that. I didn't know it was landing that way with you. Let's figure out how to how to fix this so that we can work together more effectively. But that doesn't really work with someone who the narcissist. And I think that's such an important part that pointing that out to them is not going to make a change. So that's the first thing I want to just highlight. And then the second thing you were saying about kind of recognizing that you're, you shouldn't take it personally, right and to like put up that shield to kind of not be swept into their world when that they're creating is so important because it is, I think it's especially hard in the workplace. If you have someone who's really, you know, angry with you, and being

aggressive it is, it's, in some ways, it's very easy to just, as you said, to kind of turn and run and you're like, don't do that. Don't just hightail it out of there, especially if it's your boss, right? Like, sometimes you feel like I just need to shrink into myself, because I can't, right, but to actually have the ability to say, I see that you're really upset, right? Like, I would be happy to discuss this, when you're, when you're ready to speak with me respectfully, let's like that is just really powerful to be able to hold yourself and treat yourself that way and not let their whatever emotions kind of fall on onto you. And, and I remember actually, I, I don't know if this is exactly the same thing. But I was speaking to a colleague, and she started crying about something and it was like dumping it all over and was like playing the victim and the whole thing. And I was like, oh, like, and I, as I think back now, like, Oh, she was totally nurses, she had no clue what she was, what she was doing. In that moment, everything was about her at all, she was blaming out of the whole thing. And it was really hard for me not to be like, Oh, I'm so sorry. Like, let me how can I help you with this. And really, like I needed to just be like, I'd be happy to help you problem solve this, when you know, when you're ready to just have a conversation about it. I didn't know what to do in that moment. And I definitely did not handle it as well as I could have. But thank you for now having given me some language for for dealing with this in the future, I guess?

Rebecca Zung 22:28

Well, I always try to like even when people come to my free webinars, I'm like, by the end of this, I promise you, you will walk away with stuff that you can use, you know, 100%? Because, you know, that's what people always want. It's like, what can I do today, like so that I can actually have tools in my toolbox that I can use today. Because you know, people are always like, in this drama, trauma and chaos have you know, of, of dealing with it. It's like this survival mode constantly, because you just don't even know what to do. You're in this defensive. And you know, so my SLAY methodology is Strategy, Leverage, Anticipate, and You is the why. And strategy, the first thing you know, is supposed to be creating that vision. Whereas if you want to go What's your perfect life, you know, where do you want to be a year from now. And so many times people are like, I just want them out of my life. I just want I just want to smack them down. I just want them to suffer. I just want them to pay, you know, or whatever it is. And it's like, okay, well, but that's all defensive or whatever, you know, like, what do you actually want from your life? Do you want to live on the beach? Do you want to be holding hands with your cute boyfriend or your cute girlfriend or you want to have lots of money in the bag? Do you want to have like, what do you actually want from your life? They can't even get there? Because they're just in this war zone all the time. Right? I mean, so I think that, you know, just having like some tools like, okay, what can I do to day? That's gonna help me?

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 24:16

Is it reasonable to think, you know, thinking about that kind of what do you really want out of this? To say, I want to have a good relationship with this person, I want to be able to collaborate

with them in the workplace, I want to be able to have productive conversations where we, you know, generate great ideas and we share work equally. Like is that even realistic to want that? Or is that you know, just kind of off the table knowing what you know about narcissists.

Rebecca Zung 24:42

Well, you're never going to be able to collaborate, share work equally, have like that kind of a relationship, not like that. But you know, I mean, you can have like, let's say, the person is your family member, you're gonna have to have boundaries. I mean, if they're truly a full blown narcissist, because this is a person who's a taker, that I mean, it's all about them. This is a person who just wants you to serve their needs as a person who needs endless amounts of supply. So it's, it's a relationship that's not sustainable, long term because you're just going to left be left feeling totally and completely a feeling. You know, Don't like empty and depleted all the time. And such dry. And so it's not sustainable for you, because your soul is just gonna be like, you know, depleted, I mean, anybody who's ever been in a relationship with a person like this, you just know that at the end of the day, you just nobody leaves a relationship with a narcissist, casually and goes, Wow, this was, you know really great but you know, I just have to wish you well and they hug and they walk off into the sunset and they remain friends and it just never ends up like that they run out of it like with their hair on fire screaming like they're running from a burning building usually. And you know, like they're just trying to survive, no matter what if it's professional or personal. And they're just trying to like desperate gasping for air and trying to put their lives back together is usually how it looks. And they're glad they got out alive.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:37

So in the workplace, then it sounds like there. First of all, there's like variations are kind of degrees of narcissism. So it may not be someone who is so overly extreme, it might be a little more subtle, and maybe you can manage to work with them, and kind of make it work. But

Rebecca Zung 26:53

Just a spectrum. It's a scope, you know, yes. And

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:56

It sounds like there might be some cases where for your own health and safety that you just need to leave that job, or you need to fire that employee, because whatever's happening is so detrimental to you and to your team members, that you need to actually eliminate that situation,

which means, again, either you leaving or firing someone who's just causing too much trauma in your team. Yeah,

Rebecca Zung 27:22

You know, life is short, right? I mean, life is short. And you want to be in a situation where you feel empowered, where you feel like your voice is heard, where you feel honored, respected. And if you are not in a situation like that, then you need to be able to be in a situation like that. And it may be that that particular person needs to be removed. I mean, let me just say this, that the statistics show that employers or managers are spending up to 42% of their day now, with dealing with high conflict employee, you know, employees, companies spent \$360 billion last year on high conflict employees, that's almost an epidemic at this point. And so at this point, you know, I would say that either that person needs to go. Or if you're not in a situation where you have the power to remove that person, then you might need to think about what you want from your life as far as being in that particular job. How much does that job mean to you? Right? Or can you move within that company so that you're not having to work with that person, if that person is causing you that much stress and strife? Or is there something that can be done, because sometimes, those people can be just one person, just one person can cause a lot of problems?

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 29:15

Yeah. And it's a good reminder that we need to put ourselves first. And as a manager, you need to put your team first. And even if someone is a super high performer, if they are causing all kinds of conflict and all kinds of turmoil on your team, you have a responsibility to understand the impact that they're having and to take whatever steps are necessary to allow your team collectively to thrive.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 29:38

So alright, we have to wrap up, though. So Rebecca, can you tell us about a great manager that you've worked for and what made this person such a fabulous boss?

Rebecca Zung 29:45

Gosh, you know, great manager that I worked for. I you know, I would say there's a partner that I had, he ended up being the partner that emerged my practice with and you know, the reason why I ended up merging my practice with him was because he was a mentor to me for a really

long time. And, you know, he's so great. Even when I first went out on my own as a lawyer, and he stopped by my office, I remember one day, and I had my hourly rate, I had set it low, because I was so nervous about not getting enough clients, you know, and Um, he stopped by my office. And you know, receptionist said, Oh, Jack long is here to see you. And I saw what is he doing here? You know, so I walked out and, and he had originally practiced in New York because this is in Florida. But he was a member of the Academy of matrimonial lawyers. And he was just so kind and great. And I walk in and I'm like, Jack, what are you doing here? And he goes, I need to talk to you about your hourly rate. And I said, What's I said, What? And he goes, still low. And I said, I said, Well, I'm so nervous. I'm not gonna get clients. And you know, he goes, I'm going to tell you a story. He goes, when I first started practicing law in 1960, something, whatever it was, like, you know, before I was born, because he goes, I did a divorce for a guy, and I charged him \$4,000. And at the end of it, the guy came back to me and he goes, Jack, you did a great job for me. You charged me \$4,000. My wife's attorney charged her \$5,000 and Jack's like, alright, so you should be happy. And the guy goes, well, obviously, that guy's better than you. And so Jack stood up, and he looked at me, and he goes, raise your damn rates. And so then he walks out. And the next day, he calls me up, and he says, I got a great case for you. I'm referring it to you, because I'm conflicted off. And it turns out, it was Arnold Schwarzenegger's god daughter, okay. And it was a fantastic case, like I ended up getting to meet Arnold travel with him, all these great things, right? So he tells me all about it. And at the end of the call, he goes, and they have money. So charge something decent for Christ's sake. And so he was so great, because he made me you know, like, charge what I was worth.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 32:18

So beautiful. And something that all managers can do is to, you know, help people see their own value. Love this.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 32:26

Okay, and where can people learn more about you? What's the name of your book? Where can people get a copy of it?

Rebecca Zung 32:59

So my latest book is [Slay the Bully: How to Negotiate with a Narcissist and Win](#). It's USA Today number one best seller so I'm super proud of it. So anywhere you can buy it anywhere books are sold. Amazon, of course, is the easiest place. And you can find me, my YouTube channel is, you know, 50 million views. So [RebeccaZung.TV](#) is the easiest place to find me there. And my Instagram is [@RebeccaZung](#). Or my my website is [rebeccazung.com](#), as well. So, thank you oh, and I have my FREE Crush My Negotiation Prep Worksheet, is 15 pages. It's literally

actually been downloaded by over 100,000 people. And so it's like 15 pages. It's amazing. And we'll help you start winning negotiations. If you want. It's totally free. And you can get that at winmynegotiation.com.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 33:59

Fabulous. great resources for everyone. Thank you again, so much, Rebecca, I definitely feel like I have some new strategies to employ in my own life. And so thank you.

Rebecca Zung 34:08

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 34:10

Rebecca is offering a \$1,000 discount on her SLAY Certification Program to members of Podcast Plus, this one of a kind of coaching program equips you with the essential tools to help people effectively navigate narcissistic or difficult people by applying transformative power of the slay method. Plus members also get the extended episode where Rebecca unpacks the Slay method, so you can learn how to negotiate with anyone even a high conflict personality. To get this guest bonus and many more and the extended episode, become a member at themodernmanager.com/more. All the links are in the show notes and they can be delivered to your inbox when you subscribe to my newsletter. Find that at themodernmanager.com. Thanks again for listening. Until next time.